

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSL #0032/01 0241342
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 241342Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1474
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000032

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/NCE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2018

TAGS: LO PO PREL PGOV

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR OBSITNIK'S COURTESY CALL ON FORMER
PRIME MINISTER DZURINDA

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a cordial and lively one-hour conversation, former Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda outlined his strategy for wooing voters back to his party, the Social Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU). In a series of public meetings throughout the country over the next several months, Dzurinda will combine "criticism with alternatives," in an effort to "open the eyes" of the public to what he believes are serious shortcomings on the part of the Fico government. Dzurinda acknowledged that he faces an uphill battle given the government's high approval ratings and the overall positive socio-economic conditions in the country; he is resigned to the Fico government serving out its term (until 2010). He expressed serious concern about what he described as a shift in emphasis in Slovak policy away from a strong focus on NATO and EU priorities, as well as the government's "animosity" toward the opposition, NGOs, media and "anything private." Dzurinda plans to meet with new Polish PM Tusk during his January 18 visit to Bratislava and, characterizing Tusk as a "very good guy," predicted that negotiations with the Poles would return to the right track. Ambassador Obsitnik expressed appreciation for the close bilateral relations Dzurinda cultivated during his premiership and praised the notable political and economic progress made by Slovakia under his leadership. In a separate conversation, Dzurinda's former Foreign Minister, Eduard Kukan, told us that his boss might be more reconciled to the inevitability of Kosovo's independence. End Summary.

Dzurinda's Concerns...

=====

¶2. (C) Dzurinda opened the conversation by stressing his disappointment with the foreign policy orientation of the Fico Government. The partnership with the U.S. should be pre-eminent, he stated unequivocally. Citing the Prime Minister's recent presence at a Cuban Embassy event celebrating the anniversary of the revolution, Dzurinda said the foreign policy priorities and statements of the current government as out of step with that model. Recent initiatives related to healthcare, pensions, NGOs and media also are worrisome and seem designed to take Slovakia back, not forward, according to Dzurinda. Despite these negative developments, the full impact of which might not be felt for some time according to Dzurinda, the economy is good and people are relatively content with their current circumstances and with the government. Dzurinda acknowledged that the opposition faced an uphill fight given Fico's popularity and he thought the government would last through its natural term (2010). However, he said he feels that it

is his obligation to lead the efforts to "tear the mask" off Fico and deleterious policies.

and his Response...

=====

3.(C) Dzurinda told Ambassador Obsitnik that he would be launching a new effort to reach out to the Slovak people in a series of large public meetings over the next several months. Dzurinda explained that he plans to use these events to present his critiques of the current government and to lay out SDKU programs on health care education, environment, and other key issues. Dzurinda also expressed certainty that scandals touching on the current government were serious and would begin to take a toll. (Comment: Given the nature of Slovak politics, Dzurinda may well have potentially damaging information regarding members of the coalition, but his attacks on Fico in connection with a small land purchase -- the property had been restituted and was sold to Fico later a relatively low price -- seemed flimsy and appear to have hurt Dzurinda's, not Fico's, ratings. End Comment.) In response to the Ambassador's question about media reports late last year on opposition tactics, Dzurinda claimed that it was never SDKU's intent to launch street demonstrations to protest the government -- as PM Fico suggested -- but rather to seek ways to foster vibrant and open debate. (Comment: SDKU did, in fact, suggest that peaceful demonstrations should be part of the opposition toolkit, but quickly dropped the suggestion in the face of the tepid to negative reaction from the press and other opposition parties. End comment.)

4.(C) Ambassador Obsitnik inquired about recent government claims of fraud and malfeasance in connection with the

privatization under Dzurinda's government of SPP, Slovakia's largest natural gas company. Dzurinda replied that such charges were "absolute rubbish," adding that he would welcome any inquiries into the deal. He said that Fico has raised the issue in retaliation for his move to launch a no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister in December. (Comment: Fico recently characterized the privatization the "largest theft in Slovak history" and said the government plans to make the SPP inquiry a top priority. End comment.) For his part, Dzurinda told the Ambassador he intends to mount another no-confidence vote in the next session of Parliament. I "am preparing my party and my country for a tough fight in two years," Dzurinda added. Noting the polemical nature of some of the recent exchanges between the government and the opposition -- and the media's portrayal of the rivalry between Dzurinda and Fico -- Ambassador asked about personalizing what are serious and substantive policy disputes. Dzurinda acknowledged that personalizing the dispute had not been very effective and noted that while he would play a leading role, he would not be the only face of the opposition in the months ahead. (Comment: There is significant disgruntlement among SDKU members that Dzurinda is not allowing effective politicians within the party due influence over party tactics and strategy. End comment.)

Fico's Foreign Policy: "Not Normal"

=====

5.(C) Dzurinda was sharply critical of PM Fico's statements with respect to U.S. engagement in Iraq, on Missile Defense and regarding Cuba. "Is this normal?" he asked repeatedly. Regarding U.S. missile defense plans, which he characterized as a "benefit" for Slovakia, Dzurinda shared his surprise at the position taken by the new Polish government. Dzurinda praised Tusk as a "very good man," but added that he lacked experience. Dzurinda said he planned to see Tusk during his January 18 visit to Bratislava and would urge him to take a more positive -- less transactional -- approach to his discussions with the U.S. Dzurinda opined that DefMin Sikorsky was the main force behind the current approach, calling him "too clever," but also suggested that Tusk felt the need to show (perhaps a bit naively) that he could manage

the "Russia issue." In the end, Dzurinda said, he was fairly confident the Poles would come around. He would remind Tusk, he said, of the importance of partnership with the U.S. (Note: in an separate encounter on January 17, former FM and current SDKU MP Eduard Kukan suggested to DCM that Dzurinda seems to have begun to accept the outcome on Kosovo, including that the GOS will likely join its EU partners in recognizing an independent Kosovo within the next several months. Kukan implied that Dzurinda would take a more measured approach to the issue than he had last year.)

¶6. (C) Comment and conclusion. Although Dzurinda's ratings are down, he remains as feisty as ever. There is no question that Dzurinda sincerely believes that the U.S. should be Slovakia's pre-eminent partner. At the same time, drawing parallels between Fico and Meciar, and trumpeting the role of the U.S. Ambassador, he suggested that Ambassador Obsitnik use his bully pulpit to speak out against the government (and implicitly for him). He has become more realistic about the current political context. Reflecting again on the challenges the opposition faces, Dzurinda grabbed a pen and paper and sketched out the coalition that could have been, had he won in 2006: SDKU, the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), the Christian Democrats (KDH) and Meciar's HZDS. Dzurinda asserted that this was a viable group (we are not so sure) that would have been much better for the country than the current coalition, but added that such an arrangement was no longer possible given Fico's popularity. After more than 18 months out of office, it appears that Dzurinda may have finally let go his hopes for a near-term return to government via some sort grand coalition. If that it is the case, he might begin to be a more effective opposition leader. On the other hand, he is unwilling or unable to hear the message -- sent loudly by the polls and echoed by at least some of his advisors -- that, at least for now, tactics such as no-confidence votes lower his credibility and that of the opposition -- not the Prime Minister's.

OBSITNIK